Preamble:

We are grateful to the Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria, the German Bishops Conference, Research Group on International Church affairs and Missio-Aachen, whose collaborative efforts brought us here to reflect on the Challenges of Pentecostalism in the Nigerian context. Pentecostalism is a phenomenon that should engage not only the attention of the Nigerian Church but also the universal Church. Statistics show that this phenomenon already encompassed nearly half a billion of the world population and is still multiplying geometrically. Today, it has become common to hear some Christians, respond to questions about their Church affiliation by saying; “I was born and bred Catholic, but I now fellowship with such and such Pentecostal Congregation” or “I belong to this adoration family or that prayer ministry.” This points to an inner yearning and a search by the present generation for something more. Pentecostalism, could be described as a spirit movement, it emphasizes the workings of the Holy Spirit through a re-experience of the Pentecost event, and the acquisition and use of the spiritual gifts as recorded in the new testament. It is a dynamic movement with appeal that cuts across cultures, races, age and social status. This is the more reason for which attention should be paid to it for a deeper understanding and appreciation.

Gathered for this conference were catholic bishops, priests including those actively involved in healing ministries, religious, university professors and researchers, and Pentecostals from other Church denominations. The idea was to create a fraternal environment for mutual exchange of ideas with a view to
studying Pentecostalism, appreciating its challenges in the Nigerian context and suggesting adequate ways of responding to them.

**The Appeal of Pentecostalism**

The appeal of Pentecostalism is rooted in its very nature; it is a spirit movement which has permeated virtually every facet of life, it appeals to Nigerians mostly because of the religious, socio-cultural and politico-economic situation in the country. Nigeria, as has often been noted by researchers and observers, is a very religious environment. This explains why most things with religious coloration find fertile ground in the Nigerian society. This is partly because of the influences exerted on many people by the African Traditional Religion. We live in a religious environment that is emerging from the clutches of African Traditional Religion, with its debris still guiding the beliefs and practical life of some Nigerian Christians. Most versions of Pentecostalism adapt very easily and, most often, uncritically, to some primal religious realities found already in African Traditional Religion. These primal religious realities make it easy for people to accept Pentecostalism and adapt to it, since to some extent, it allows them to be seen as Christians while practicing their outmoded but more familiar old religion.

On the socio-cultural and economic level, the vast majority of Nigerians are struggling under the weight of death-dealing poverty. ‘There is hunger in the land’ has become a popular saying. Healthcare and other social services are either grossly inefficient or non-existent or beyond the reach of the vast majority of the populace while good and qualitative education seem to be within the reach of a very few. This is the consequence of a long line of visionless, greedy, ignorant and self-serving leadership. This has created a seemingly hopeless situation. Pentecostalism took advantage of this situation, promising miraculous healing to the sick and prosperity to the poor. Whether the promises are fulfilled or not, the hope it offers, has kept people attracted to Pentecostalism.

Moreover, still on the social level, we are living in an increasingly digitalized, mobile and consequently impatient society where a quick fix to all human
problems is sought after. In a *McDonaldized* society like ours, some person seem to be remaking God into their own image and likeness; where solutions to life problems are showcased as in McDonald restaurants and fast food places, and one is invited to come and receive them exactly as one desires them. Some brands of Pentecostalism have become attractive because they promise quick solution to myriads of life difficulties.

Other reasons for its appeal includes the fact that it is gender inclusive, its peculiar way of reading, quoting and interpreting the bible to the concrete needs of the individual, vibrant preaching and music, the use of all available forms of multimedia to get their message through have all aided its appeal and spread.

**EARLY RESPONSES TO PENTECOSTALISM**

The responses to the challenges of Pentecostalism have been complex and complicated. In general, responses have moved from aggression and disdain to some sort of admiration and even imitation in some quarters. The earliest response was that of aggression. Not a few Catholics looked on Pentecostals with disdain and at best with suspicion. They were a laughing stock and those who worshiped with them did so secretly. Those bold enough to profess it openly were believed to have done so in search of solution to myriads of problems plaguing them.

However, as years passed and their presence and impact began to be felt within Christianity in Nigeria, the attitudes towards them began to change. Thus from suspicion, pity, disdain and aggression, there was a gradual movement towards admiration in some quarters, imitation by some others and association with them as collaborators and dialogue partners. A concrete example here could be seen in the attitude of some Catholics to some religious behaviours from Pentecostals.

When Pentecostalism started gaining momentum in Nigeria, they joined some of the other Churches in being critical of Catholics for devotions to Mary and the saints and for keeping their images as images of reverences. Some Catholics who got involved with them began to be critical of these Catholic practices in imitation of Pentecostals. Today, some Pentecostals have started keeping and
reverencing the images of their pastors and printing large billboards and signposts of them and devoutly using them as holy pictures and stickers. Some Catholics, in imitation of them, now do the same with images returning to the use of images. Some even abuse it by reverencing the images and posters of some charismatic persons. Moreover, many Catholics now produce holy oils, holy powders and pomades, anointed handkerchiefs and so on just like the Pentecostals.

Among Catholic priests there are three types of responses to Pentecostalism. One is imitation. Presumably in order to avoid the loss of members to Pentecostal churches, some priests tend to imitate them especially in their method of preaching and fund raising.

In many adoration grounds founded by Catholic priests many priests, in imitation of some Pentecostal pastors, preach faith healing through positive confession and sacrifice. Also, some priests in Nigeria are beginning to place emphasis on tithing almost to the level of Pentecostal Prosperity Gospel preachers. In fact, some parishes have added a monthly tithe Sunday to their programme.

The second type is rejection. There is a group of priests who out-rightly reject anything Pentecostal. They are very critical of Pentecostalism in general. They look at it as a heresy that must be suppressed at all costs. These priests find it irritating when any of their faithful pray in any manner seen as imitation of the Pentecostal method.

The third is critical reflection. There are priests mostly from the academia who are research-oriented and, in response to the phenomenon, propose a critical study in order to understand. They believe that, the aberrations and shortcomings of Pentecostalism, notwithstanding, they invite Catholics to a critical reflection and evaluation of their pastoral strategy as a Church. A number of priests have researched and written volumes concerning the topic in question. For example, the National Seminaries Commission dedicated its 2004
workshop to the question of Pentecostalism and its attendant phenomena\(^1\). Two years later, the *Catholic Theological Association of Nigeria* dedicated its 21\(^{st}\) conference to the same issue\(^2\).

The Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Nigeria has also been making frantic efforts to respond to the challenges posed by Pentecostalism. They have used their teaching office to give directives and guidelines to the clergy and lay faithful. At the formative stage of Catholic Charismatic Renewal of Nigeria, the Bishops provided proper guidelines to regulate the new movement\(^3\). Again when healing ministry became rampant in the country with some abuses that followed it, they issued another guideline to regulate healing ministries\(^4\). The Catholic Bishops, while appreciating the positive impacts made by Pentecostalism, have not hesitated to point out abuses and to proffer guidelines aimed at curbing those abuses. Even recently a number of instructions and guidelines are contained in their communiqué issued after their September 2016 plenary meeting\(^5\). The current conference is again an attempt to understand and respond to Pentecostalism. On this note, we appreciate the presence and contributions of Pentecostals from other churches and other brothers and sisters from other churches. Your contributions have enriched our dialogue and ecumenical engagement.

**PERSPECTIVES ON RESPONDING TO PENTECOSTALISM**

Looking through the studies and interactions during this conference, we can delineate a few practical steps that could be useful in dealing with the issues. For greater clarity, we can talk of actions the Church in Nigeria could take *ad extra*

---


and those she could take *ad intra*. It is to be noted that some of these steps are already in place. What is being suggested here is to reinforce those steps that are already in place, redirect those that may have been misdirected. Above all, we need to go beyond words to enforcement.

**Response *ad Extra* – Ecumenism**

Given the ubiquitous presence of Pentecostalism within Christianity in Nigeria, the urgency of ecumenical dialogue with them cannot be over-emphasized. The Catholic Church cannot, by any standard, ignore their presence since doing so would undermine her evangelising mission. There is need to undertake a form of ecumenical dialogue best suited for the present circumstance. In this regard, a pertinent question is: which form of ecumenism. Given the fragmentary nature of Pentecostalism, it is difficult to engage in theological ecumenism with them. However, other forms of ecumenical dialogue such as dialogue of life and the dialogue of spiritual experience can be fruitful possibilities. The details of these forms of ecumenism could be worked out gradually with prayerfulness and deep and patient study.

**Responses *ad Intra***

As the Catholic Church does everything within her powers to reach out to our Pentecostal brothers and sisters in the form of ecumenical dialogue, she is equally invited to look within and adjust her methods and pastoral strategies in order to respond appropriately to the signs of the time. The following practical suggestions could be pursued or strengthened.
I  Study and Catechesis

Pentecostalism is relatively new within the Nigerian pastoral environment. As such efforts should be made to study this reality not only as a challenge but also in an effort to listen to “what the spirit is saying to the Churches.” Prayerful studies and research on Pentecostalism is therefore a good way to go. It is recognised that upon calls by similar conferences and individuals, seminaries now offer Pentecostalism as a course. What is needed here is a strengthening of this project. In line with studies, research centres for Pentecostalism could be established to deepen studies in this field. Research grants could be given to candidates who are ready to study this phenomenon purely as researchers and come up with opinions that can enhance and deepen the understanding of Pentecostals. Submissions from the study groups agree that a special “Think Tank” should be set to further what has been initiated by this conference.

Suggestions also point to a good philosophical and theological training for priests. No resources and time are too much to be invested in the philosophical and theological training of seminarians, priests, religious, catechists and all those who are responsible for catechesis within the Christian community. A theologically well trained mind can differentiate authentic Christian teaching from falsehood. In this direction, much has been done but there is always room for improvement. An important area where this catechesis could be enhanced so that it produces strong results is within the Basic Christian Communities.

II  The Basic Christian Community

One of the things that make Pentecostalism attractive is the solidarity and support that it gives to members especially in times of crises. The argument has been made that given the numbers of Catholic Churches in Nigeria, it is very difficult for the pastor to give the required attention to members especially those in any form of need. In response to this and other issues, most Catholic Dioceses in Nigeria have created the Basic Christian Community or what in some areas is called the zones. It is a smaller unit within the parish setting where Christians living on the same streets and neighbourhoods meet in fellowship. It provides an
environment for faith sharing and solidarity. The Holy Father, Pope John Paul II recognised the need for such communities in Africa when in the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Ecclesia in Africa*, he wrote: “Right from the beginning, the Synod Fathers recognised that the Church as family cannot reach her full potential as a Church unless she is divided into communities small enough to foster close human relationship”\(^6\).

Truly, most parishes have created these Basic Christian Communities, where the Church functions as a family. But all too often, these communities instead of constituting authentic cenacles of prayer, faith sharing and catechesis have become mere administrative instruments for taxation of the faithful. The point here is that a return to the reasons for which such communities were formed and efforts to abide by those reasons would do a great service to the Church. Such communities should be places where catechesis and prayers should be enhanced, where theologians, whether clergy, lay or religious, should be teaching the faithful. In such an environment, it is easier to detect theological errors and practices and nip them in the bud.

III **Strengthening and Regulation of Healing/ Prayer Ministries and Charismatic Groups**

Prayer and Adoration ministries and the Catholic Charismatic Renewal Movement of Nigeria provide a veritable response to Pentecostalism for Catholics in Nigeria. Thus the Church in Nigeria should pay attention to them as a veritable tool for her evangelizing mission. This is because at the level of development and faith of the people, prayer ministries still make serious meaning and serve as avenues of encouraging the faith and living it out”. Again prayer and adoration ministries have become popular in Nigeria. They need to be encouraged and guided properly. Before we criticize them let us in some way experience their world. Care should be taken to see that abuses are reduced by supervision and regulations. Again, before approving their establishment,

\(^6\) JOHN PAUL II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Ecclesia in Africa* (September 1995), n. 89
Church leaders should discern the motives behind their establishments to ensure that they are pure and not for vain glory and economic purposes.

IV  Sincere Efforts towards Authentic Inculturation

We have noted that one of the strong attractions to Pentecostalism is its closeness to African Traditional Religion through the primal religious realities of the people. These religious realities resonate with what is dear to the people. It needs to be emphasised, therefore, that a careful and critical effort needs to be made towards the inculturation of the faith in our land. To avoid the ever present danger of syncretism, theologians must spend time in prayers, energy and resources in study, so as to purify those elements in our culture that are not against the Christian message so that through inculturation, they can be assimilated into the Church. For only when faith becomes culture can it be truly lived.

V  A Prophetic Church

The point has been stressed that the presence of poverty is a fertile breeding ground for Pentecostalism. The level of poverty in Nigeria is accentuated, as has been noted, by years of poor leadership which led to the absence or near collapse of social structures that provide means of livelihood, good schools, health care and other social amenities to the growing population of the country. This situation, has grown from bad to worse because of corruption and mismanagement of the country‘s natural resources. It is the primary function of government to provide for her citizenry. Successive governments in Nigeria have not done so well in this regard. In a situation as the one Nigeria finds herself, it is the function of religious leaders, as conscience of the society, to prophetically stand up to denounce unjust structures and redirect the society. It is a difficult role that sometimes calls for the supreme sacrifice but that is what the Church is called to do at this very moment. Let it not be said that the Church is silent in the face of such evil or seen to ally comfortably with the powers that be. She must be seen to denounce evil, cooperate in bringing about a just and equitable society where justice and peace will reign in order to enhance better
life for the citizenry and reduce poverty. In doing this, she must also be seen to be just in herself for the preacher is the first listener and as Pope Paul VI puts it: “Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses”.

VI  Beyond Words and Regulations

We have noted that Church authorities in Nigeria have, on different occasions, responded with guidelines that regulate pastoral and liturgical practices in order to avoid abuses. But our experience is that these abuses persist and worsen. The question is thus being raised as to whether these guidelines end up only on the papers on which they are written or whether they are ever enforced?

Thus beyond issuing guideline the pastors of the Church, as a matter of urgency, need to reflect on the appropriate means of enforcing the guidelines. It is true that religion is no coercion but it is also true that every game has its rule and signing up for such games means accepting the rules. Beyond words and regulations there should be enforcement.

Moreover, history beckons on Church leaders, today more than ever, to be ready to lead by the examples of their very lives. While insisting on correct pastoral and liturgical practices, they should themselves be examples of such correct practices and be ready to take all necessary steps to see that these regulations are implemented. It will be counter witness if they accept privately or publicly donations, gifts and finances accruing from such aberrations in Catholic liturgy only to come publicly to denounce such aberrations.

Again, we must all realize that if we work for rectitude of teaching and practice, in the present circumstance, it will come with a price. Some of those who now follow and encourage the aberrations coming from Pentecostalism have become very popular and sometimes powerful among the Christians. Some of them now issue subtle threat to authorities who may want to correct them; they threaten to break away or to instigate an uprising from among their followers. The truth is

---

7 PAUL VI, Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, (December 1975), n.41.
that some of them are motivated purely by economic reasons with very little spirituality at work. Thus, like most capitalists, they are willing to do and say virtually anything to silence opposition. Bearing this in mind, we must like Jesus (John 6:60-71) not be ready to compromise the essence of our teaching with worldly popularity.

Conclusion

Your Excellencies, dear brothers and sisters. It has been an engaging experiences. It has been a brotherly exchange of ideas. Certainly, we are concluding this conference better enriched in our understanding of Pentecostalism in the Nigerian context. The very urgent line of actions is to set up a think tank to further this discussion, replicate this study on provincial and diocesan levels and start experimenting with the suggestions already proposed.